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# **THE TWA PYGMIES:** **RWANDA'S IGNORED PEOPLE**

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# **THE TWA PYGMIES: RWANDA'S IGNORED PEOPLE**

'RWANDA: Census finds 937,000 died in genocide  
KIGALI, 2 April 2004 (IRIN) - A census carried out by Rwanda's Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports found that 937,000 Tutsi and politically moderate Hutus died during the 1994 genocide, an official announced on Thursday...  
"We commemorate the genocide to give honour and dignity to the victims of genocide, reflect on the past and strive to move to a better future," he added.'<sup>1</sup>

As this IRIN report testifies, ten years after the Rwandan Genocide the consequences of these events for the Twa of Rwanda continue to be ignored by mainstream Rwandan society and the media.

The horrifying number of Tutsi and moderate Hutu that died represent about 14 per cent of the nation. Although less than one per cent of Rwanda's population, it is estimated that 30 per cent of the Rwandan Twa died or were killed during the Genocide and ensuing war<sup>2</sup>. Despite having no interest or role in national politics, the Twa have suffered disproportionately as a consequence of the rivalries of others. The majority of Twa left in Rwanda in 1995 were poverty stricken women and children with few sources of income and inadequate land. This human tragedy remains ignored by almost all commentators on the Rwandan Genocide and war.

This chapter will sketch out how the Twa have been marginalized to such an extent that their deaths, struggles and resistance are so rarely mentioned, acknowledged or remembered. After some historical background and a brief introduction to the major issues, this chapter will describe key features of the Twa's experience of the Genocide, war and life afterwards. In order to present rarely heard voices from Rwanda their own words are used as much as possible.

## **The Twa of Rwanda**

The Twa of Rwanda are part of a larger grouping of Twa Pygmies. They were historically specialist hunter-gatherers adapted to the mountain forests of the region. They are the indigenous people of the Great Lakes Region<sup>3</sup>. All Twa recognize their shared descent

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<sup>1</sup> IRIN Africa English reports, 4/2/2004. Copyright (c) UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:93.

<sup>3</sup> Research by both local African and European historians, including Mateke 1970; Maquet and Naigiziki 1957; and Vansina 2001: 25, 32-4, indicates that the forests in Southwestern Uganda, Eastern DRC and Western and Northern Rwanda were occupied by Twa prior to the arrival of other groups.

from these first hunter-gatherer inhabitants despite speaking different languages today. Today Twa live in parts of southwestern Uganda, eastern DRC, Rwanda and Burundi.

Living dispersed over approximately 100,000km<sup>2</sup>, their total population is estimated to be 69,500– 87,000. This is composed of 20,000– 27,000 in Rwanda; 30,000– 40,000 in Burundi; 16,000 in DRC; and 3,500– 4,000 in Uganda (Lewis 2000: 5). The Twa are a minority numerically and politically, making up between 0.02–0.7 per cent of the total population in the various countries they occupy. In Rwanda they make up an estimated 0.2 – 0.4 per cent of the population.

Despite being numerically insignificant in Rwanda today, the Twa's historic role as the first people of this area makes them a fundamental constituent of Rwandan society and culture. They figure prominently in other groups' historical and mythical narratives, and due to their status as first occupants the Twa hold crucial roles in chieftaincy and earth-fertility rituals. Their traditional culture is respected for its sophisticated knowledge of the forest ecosystem; in, for instance, the uses of different plants for food and medicine, or for hunting and orientation skills. The Twa's great talent for the performing arts, as musicians, singers, dancers, acrobats and clowns, is unsurpassed in the region and widely appreciated.

As the original inhabitants of the land the Twa deserve respect. In contrast to later-comers, the Twa used the environment without destroying or seriously damaging it. It is only due to their long-term custody of the area that later-comers have good land to use. Whilst maintaining their own values and distinctive lifestyle, the Twa have adopted aspects of the languages and practices of their neighbours. In Rwanda they share clan names, marriage rites and certain religious beliefs.

## **The historical context**

Although they were once hunting and gathering throughout the Great Lakes Region, today it is estimated that less than 7000 Twa have some access to forest resources.<sup>4</sup> Starting several centuries ago in Rwanda and Burundi, incoming agriculturalists and pastoralists deforested large parts of the most fertile areas for farming and herding. As the forests were destroyed, immigrant groups depended less and less on the Twa for access to the forest and its produce. The consequent loss of hunting and gathering territories resulted in many Twa becoming increasingly dependent on the farmers and herders for food and land.

In the last century deforestation accelerated as populations boomed and international influences promoted large agricultural and industrial projects, infrastructure developed, and logging and mining occurred in forested areas. The government designated large areas of forest as military zones and banned local people. The recent imposition of conservation areas in the last remaining good forests; Parc des Volcans and Nyungwe

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis 2000:9.

forest, mean that Twa are only able to access forest resources clandestinely, risking beatings, fines and imprisonment. Without consultation or reparation, they have been denied the right to practice their ancestral lifestyle.

With the diminishment of access to forest resources Twa became increasingly dependant on alternative livelihoods. They became woodcrafters, tinkers, blacksmiths, potters, day labourers, bards and performers in the countryside, and some groups became the clients of chiefs and served at their courts. Some Twa became clients of the Tutsi kings (*mwamis*). They performed important roles for the kings such as hunting leopard and elephant and bringing honey to the royal court, or working as jesters, dancers, singers, musicians, messengers and warriors. Some Twa men gained rank and were awarded favours, including land and cattle, and a few became well-known, such as Bashyeta who was ennobled by King Cyirima II.

However, agricultural labouring, transporting goods and occasional craft activities, all insecure low status jobs, became the main activities for most Twa. Unable to obtain secure land for farming or for building upon, many became dependent on pottery as their only reliable source of income. In Rwanda pottery became synonymous with the Twa.

Twa claimed that up until the 1970s pottery had provided a small but dependable income. The Twa made pots – for cooking, eating and holding water – that every Rwandan household required. In the 1970s industrially produced jerricans, basins, bowls, plates, etc became widely popular. This competition forced Twa to keep their prices static and attractively cheap. As a result of inflation the real income gained from pottery fell. Additionally, access to clay became increasingly difficult as land pressure encouraged farmers to reclaim clay marshes for cultivation.

Today Twa often become financially poorer by continuing as potters. The time, effort and resources invested in producing pots and taking them to market can exceed the financial returns gained by selling them. Twa identity until now has been built on their status as first people with specialized skills that make a unique economic contribution to other groups. First men's economic activities, hunting and craftwork, became largely redundant, now women's pottery also has. This has led to many Twa men and women experiencing a crisis of identity.

The collapse of the Twa's craft economy has forced them to become increasingly dependent on marginal subsistence strategies, such as casual labouring and begging. In 1993, begging had become an important survival strategy for 70 per cent of the Twa<sup>5</sup>. Some children, especially those living near urban centres, started begging at four or five years of age. They had more success than their elders.

Some Twa parents in Kanzenze, interviewed in 1993, explained that the severity of their hunger caused them to eat the skins of bananas they earned working for their Hutu neighbours. They often went for between three and five days without eating. Their young children abandoned these parents to live as beggars in town because of the eternal hunger

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:44.

at home<sup>6</sup>. In severe cases like this, food scarcity and the misery of poverty have led to the breakdown of the family.

Quite commonly in Twa communities around Rwanda social relations are strained and groups are unstable. As tensions increase groups become smaller. Their ability to resist expropriation, exploitation or violence diminishes and they descend a spiral of increasing insecurity, marginality and poverty. Their lowly status, small numbers and the dispersal of their communities have contributed to their extreme political weakness and the serious difficulties Twa have in asserting their rights.

## Landlessness

Twa have been dispossessed of almost all their traditional lands and rarely enjoy security of tenure for what remains. This chronic landlessness is central to understanding their extraordinary poverty. It results from the absence of contemporary recognition, in customary or statute law, for hunting and gathering as conferring ownership or use-rights to the land so-used.<sup>7</sup>

Almost invariably the Twa have not received fair compensation or replacement lands following the expropriation of their lands for farming, pasture, and more recently, large agricultural projects, military training areas and wildlife conservation. The last remaining forest-dwelling Twa, known as *Impunyu*, were recently evicted from Gishwati Forest, the Parc des Volcans and Nyungwe Forest. They have not been compensated for the expropriation of their land and the destruction of their culture and livelihoods; only a few families were allocated inadequate plots of land by the local authorities<sup>8</sup>.

Twa who have recognized rights to land often obtained them through patron-client relationships with members of royal families or the *mwami*, or as tenants (*abagererwa*) under the feudal *ubukonde* tenure system. Research in 1993 showed that 84 per cent of Twa who had some land, had received it from the *mwamis* before 1959, and only 3 per cent had received land from the government between 1961 and 1993. Since colonial times, hardly any land has been distributed to the Twa.

With independence from Belgium and the fall of the Tutsi monarchy between 1959 and 1961, those Twa who had obtained support from royal courts became vulnerable and many were persecuted in efforts to force them from their land. Many other Twa were tenants of Hutu farmers who rented the land they lived on in return for labour and goods. Their tenancy was fragile and they were subject to their landlords' whims. Testimonies from Twa recorded by Kagabo and Mudandagizi (1974: 79-87) describe how often they were subjected to abuse and exploitation in this period.

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:40.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson 2003:6 provides more detail. Lewis 2000:19-20 describes the pre-colonial recognition of these rights by the Rwandan *mwami*.

<sup>8</sup> Jackson 2003:6.

The 'Peasant Revolution' in the early 1960s redistributed land among those Rwandans who had not fled the violence and massacres that accompanied the fall of the monarchy. However, Twa were mostly ignored by this process. During the late 1970s and 1980s land pressure steadily increased as the Rwandan population augmented. As their children became old enough to start their own families, many peasants recovered their fields from tenants to provide their progeny with land to farm. Twa tenants were particularly vulnerable to this process and many felt it was unjust. They often refused to leave, provoking conflicts in which they had little chance of success. Many Twa were moved on in this way and ended up in increasingly marginal areas. Others went to join relatives who lived on land obtained from the kings.

The famous community of Rotunde in Kibungo was popular with the Tutsi Kings due to their exceptional skills as musicians and dancers. Under the leadership of Mbishibishi this community was given a substantial area of land. Since the fall of the monarchy relatives from other areas came to Rotunde expecting some land. Generations have grown up and inheritance has divided the land into ever smaller plots. By 1993 only one family out of 32 families had enough land to farm.

Today the Twa are one of the most disadvantaged groups in the Great Lakes Region in terms of land ownership<sup>9</sup>. Surveys of Rwandan Twa in 1993 and 1997 showed that only 1.6 per cent had enough land to feed their families, 13% were entirely landless and the rest had insufficient land<sup>10</sup>. In 2002, only 22 per cent of Twa households in Cyangugu province had any agricultural land<sup>11</sup>. By contrast, 80 per cent of Rwandan households owned some farmland in a recent national survey<sup>12</sup>. Twa land insecurity is so prevalent that many communities are transient squatters, constantly seeking land to lodge on before being moved on.

## Discrimination

The insecurity of Twa subsistence strategies has contributed to their increasing poverty and marginalization from mainstream society. In all places they are discriminated against by their neighbours. Discrimination tends to be much more of a problem in the countryside than in towns and is practised by local people including local officials. This discrimination is similar to that experienced by other hunter-gatherers in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>13</sup> and is typically manifested as:

**Negative stereotyping:** Twa are claimed to be backward, childish, dirty, ignorant, thieving, immoral and stupid. In myths and chiefly rituals the Twa's hunting life is portrayed as decadent, immoral and depraved<sup>14</sup>. In these and other ways the Twa are

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<sup>9</sup> Jackson (2003:6) provides a summary of the evidence and major trends.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:38.

<sup>11</sup> Association Pour la Promotion Batwa 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Govt of Rwanda 2002: 28-9.

<sup>13</sup> Woodburn 1997 and Kenrick and Lewis 2001 provide analyses of these practices.

<sup>14</sup> Kagabo and Mudandagizi 1974:77.

stereotyped as not fully human or socialised beings. Such attitudes have a profound effect on the Twa's status in wider Rwandan society. Indeed, their rights as first inhabitants are conveniently denied because they are not really people.

Other communities despise the Twa as an uncivilised and subhuman race, who eat repulsive food and lack intelligence or moral values. In recent years the Twa have been stereotyped as poachers, most notably of gorillas, by Northern media, as in the Hollywood film 'Gorillas in the Mist', and by conservation agencies who wish to justify denying them access to forest they traditionally inhabited.

**The denial of their rights:** Notably their rights to land, but also other rights such as the right to represent and speak for themselves, or to practice their hunting and gathering economy. This is a major problem for *Impunyu*, who are actively prevented from entering the remaining forest on their ancestral lands and whose protests are ignored. In other cases, Twa tenants are denied the right to freedom of movement, association, and landlords claim their labour and other capacities. In many areas Twa will have difficulty in obtaining justice through local courts unless they are supported or represented by non-Twa.

**Segregation:** Many non-Twa will not eat or drink with Twa, will not allow them to approach too close, to sit on the same seat or touch cooking, eating and drinking implements. Many of their neighbours will not allow them in their houses, or accept them as marital or sexual partners. Their communities are segregated from other groups, forced to live on the boundaries of population centres, or on marginal land unwanted by others. They must not draw water from wells at the same time as others, they should remain on the margins of public spaces, and when selling goods in markets can only sit away from other sellers.

Although these practices are less rigidly adhered to in urban contexts many underlying biases against Twa remain.

## **The build-up to war and Genocide**

During research in 1993 Twa regularly reported serious abuses of their rights in Rwandan law: land-grabbing; physical and verbal abuse; denial of access to vital local resources such as land, clay and water; denial of effective access to education, health care and legal redress. After 1990, in the final years of Habyarimana's regime, it appears that abuses became more frequent and serious as the regime reacted to the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) invasion from Uganda by encouraging ethnic hatred and violence directed at non-Hutu. The historic links between the Tutsi royals and the Twa were highlighted to justify persecution of the Twa.

Prior to this period the majority of abuses suffered by the Twa were economically motivated. With the rise of the MRND (Movement for Democracy and Development) and their youth militia Interahamwe, a political culture of violence and murder was

promoted using a fanatic Hutu-extremist ideology. This led to more unprovoked and politically motivated abuses against Twa. In Masango, a man explained:

‘I am living on my own surrounded by Hutu. But the worst part of it is that the Hutu spend each night behind my house hoping to kill me. I am not poisoning anyone. I am not stealing. Why are they after me? I have no cattle. The Hutu say that they will take advantage of ‘multipartism’ and make sure the Twa die like mice.’

D. M., Twa man Masango, 1993.<sup>15</sup>

The Arusha Accords, signed in 1990, included the acceptance of multi-party democracy. The Presidential party, MRND, began a sustained effort to gain popular support. Offering material incentives of food, drink, salaried work, gifts and political protection, party members encouraged others to join. Large and influential communities, including some Twa ones, were targeted all over Rwanda.

As Mbishibishi’s group at Rutonde discovered, refusal to accept these overtures resulted in violent intimidation and sustained coercion. When visiting Rutonde in 1993, Mbishibishi recounted that several times he had been forced into hiding whilst MRND activists searched the village wanting to kill him. Mbishibishi, along with many others from his community, was murdered at the beginning of the Genocide.

‘I am Mbishibishi’s sister-in-law. My husband died during the war with my three children. We don’t know why they died because they were left behind and could not escape. Many members of our family were killed: six adults and ten children, Mbishibishi among them. During the war we were very miserable ... We were suffering for no reason since we did not belong to any political party. This is the general problem of Twa people.’

N.C. Twa woman 66, Rutonde 1995.<sup>16</sup>

Although most Twa are largely ignorant of current affairs and national politics they tend, like Mbishibishi and his sister-in-law quoted above, to remain neutral. However the extreme poverty of many Twa households and the discrimination they suffer in mainstream life meant that individual Twa could be manipulated. The political protection and material incentives offered by MRND were attractive to some.

The manipulation of the Masango Twa by the then mayor Mr. Mpamo, a founder member of MRND, illustrates this dynamic. When visiting this shockingly poor community in 1993 we were told of numerous injustices by commune officials against the Twa. Every man present and almost all women had been imprisoned by the commune for either not paying the annual commune tax, or for marrying illegally since they could not afford to register officially. This degree of intimidation was critical to the Twa’s manipulation. Offering food, work and political protection Mpamo succeeded in bribing Twa to join the MRND. As April 1994 approached his efforts intensified and more and more Twa joined.

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:51

<sup>16</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:57

It was not the political message that attracted them, rather it was the respite from intimidation and the opportunity for food, some money and political protection.

Political tensions increased with the October 1993 coup in Burundi when thousands of displaced Hutu crossed the border into Rwanda. Security in the border areas deteriorated and members of many communities became victims of physical abuse and crime by some of these refugees. The UN High Commission for Refugees formally protested that Burundian refugees were being recruited to help MRND pressurise people to participate in political killings in Rwanda. Twa villages near Ntili on the Burundian border were burnt, the inhabitants attacked and some murdered in unprovoked violence. Between October 1993 and March 1994 a total of eleven Twa villages were torched and attacked in this way.<sup>17</sup>

These, and many similar events, were incited during radio broadcasts by supporters of MRND at the infamous Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines. At the time of the Burundian coup a number of inflammatory stories directly implicated the Twa as aides of the Tutsi invaders and encouraged listeners to punish them. The unpopular, politically weak and impoverished Twa communities were among the first victims in the build up to Genocide.

## **Mass-killings, Genocide and War**

‘We started to hear loud bangs and we ran away. On our way I lost two children: a boy and a girl. Many families have also lost their children. The decision to return to our homes was due to these deaths. When we arrived people from the RPF started to ask us what our reasons were for leaving our homes. We told them that when the war started many were escaping and when we saw that we also decided to escape. Now the war is finished and we are back.’  
M. M. Twa woman, aged 30, Tambwe 1995.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to testimonies from Hutu and Tutsi survivors which often begin with the shooting down of the President’s plane, the Twa’s testimonies rarely did.<sup>19</sup> The Hutu and Tutsi from whom the testimonies came seemed aware of the political significance of this event. For the Twa, rarely able to listen to radios, the massacres and war took most by surprise when they began hearing shooting. The Twa often started their testimonies with the arrival of fighting in their commune.

‘When the war started all we could hear were the gunshots. So we tried to run away, myself, my husband and my five children. But then my husband was killed, my children are here with me. We have no clothes, we are hungry ... A lot of people died because they refused to become Interahamwe. We were victimised for nothing. Right now we have become nothing, have nothing, not even clothes. We have no

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:59.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:60.

<sup>19</sup> Based on those recorded in Africa Rights 1995.

land and cannot grow our own food. We are miserable and all we wish for is to get out of here. All our relatives died.'

K. A., Twa woman, aged 30, Kanzenze 1995.<sup>20</sup>

In many areas the Twa were threatened and killed by Interahamwe. Their historic relations with the Tutsi royals made their allegiance to a Hutu state doubtful to many Interahamwe, soldiers and members of the presidential guard, and was often given as an excuse for killing Twa. Twa communities were often menaced: 'First we kill the Tutsi, then we will kill you!', or 'Your time will come!' (UNPO 1995:19). Many Twa fled when the massacres began.

'... When the massacres started my brother and I, with other people, fled to Nyarutarama. There were police for the RPF at that place... Another thing to mention is the death of a large number of Twa who were killed at Kibagabaga primary school. Before I fled, Karamage [an Interahamwe] came and asked me if we could go and eat the cows of those who were killed. I told him to go and eat them because I did not want to join in the killing. He replied that he was going but that if he saw any of us the next day he would kill us like the Tutsi.'

R. D., Twa man aged 46, Kibagabaga 1995.<sup>21</sup>

The UNPO mission heard testimonies of massacres of Twa in Murambi and Gituza communes in Byumba. In Nyanza, Butare, 20 Twa who ran into a group of Interahamwe were accused of supporting the Tutsi and killed. In Ntyazo commune, Gitarama, a group of Twa including small children were stopped at an Interahamwe roadblock and asked to present their identity cards, that noted ethnicity. They were massacred for being Twa.<sup>22</sup>

Those Twa not in flight themselves often did what they could to protect and assist fleeing Tutsi and others. Where resistance was possible Twa also grouped together with other villagers to repel the murderers and protect themselves.

'We heard gunshots left and right. On the fifth we saw soldiers herding people into the church at Nyamata. Later in the evening we heard gunshots and we realised they had finished them all. I did not see any villagers from here kill anyone or even hit anyone. We villagers used bows and arrows and spears to defend ourselves. My family lost three children. I was almost killed. Now [due to my injuries] I am unable to look for work or food. The young child I live with is almost dying.'

M.J., Twa woman aged 24, Kanzenze 1995.<sup>23</sup>

In many areas the Interahamwe put severe pressure on people to participate in the mass-killings. Twa were also targeted in this 'force-to-kill' campaign.

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<sup>20</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:61-2

<sup>21</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:61.

<sup>22</sup> UNPO 1995:19-20.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:62

‘People say that they were forced by the Hutu to participate otherwise they were going to be killed like the Tutsi.’

M.S. Twa man aged 37, Shyrongi, 1995.

‘The way things happened the Twa were victimised during the war. Some Twa were taken to man the road blocks and they did it in order to avoid being killed, because if you didn’t they called you a traitor like the Inkotanyi (RPF).’

M.N. Twa woman aged 53, Kigoma 1995.<sup>24</sup>

Africa Rights (1994: 252-7) reports that some Twa were used by the Interahamwe to rape and scandalise women, especially at road blocks. This was ‘intended as a humiliation in the social context of Rwanda’. Accounts of Twa participating with Interahamwe for material gain are reported by UNPO (1995:21-2).

In explaining what happened, many Twa said they felt terrorised and victimised. The extreme coercion used by Interahamwe despite the Twa’s marginality to politics made them feel this was a terrible injustice. Whether by choice or not, the Twa have no impact on national politics, and most prefer to remain uninvolved. Thus the diabolical logic of Interahamwe that to refuse to join the killing meant you must support the Tutsi and thus deserve to be killed, was felt to be the most extreme political blackmail.

‘My husband’s name is R. During the war Interahamwe people came into our house and asked my husband why he was not helping in the massacres. As he said he was unable to do so, they took him by force. He was beaten very much by people saying that he was refusing to kill because he liked Tutsi. These Interahamwe also decided to come and check the whole house to see if there were any Tutsi hiding in it. There was nothing I could do because the Twa have always been oppressed.

‘When the war was over R. and his brother M. were taken to prison by people saying that they had participated in the massacres ... We would like them to be judged, because the one who is accusing them said that they had killed her children while she never had any children. When I went to visit them, I saw only his brother. I had taken some food for them. The pot I sent did not come back. Some people told me my husband was in Gitarama. I went there, but in vain, now I have given up.’

M., Twa woman aged 40, Kacyru 1995.<sup>25</sup>

Another man summarised the main issues well.

‘About Twa behaviour, starting around April 1994: They behaved well but were eventually victimised. We lived by making pots and cultivating the land, but food became scarce once the war started. People were telling us to go and man the roadblocks and if we refused they said the Twa should be killed. Some did what they were told, in order not to be killed, and others lost their lives. Those who ran away were separated from their families and some have not yet been found. Some

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<sup>24</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:64.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:65-6.

people were arrested going to the border and put into prison without a charge, with no visitors and no food.

‘None of the Twa wanted power or played with the politics of killing. Each Twa finds him or herself without relatives, and we have no idea why we had to suffer.’  
P. J-B., Twa man aged 35, Kigoma 1995.<sup>26</sup>

## **Flight**

Confused and horrified by the conflict around them, for many Twa fleeing was their only option. Whether to avoid the threats of Interahamwe, to escape fighting between the RPF and RAF, or to avoid the RPF because of participation in Interahamwe’s work, most Twa fled from their homes at some point in the conflict. The journey was very dangerous and many did not survive.

‘I live with my three daughters and they helped me a lot when we were escaping to Kibuye during the war. When we saw so many dead people on the way with no one to bury them, they decided to take me back so that this does not happen to us.’  
N.D., Twa woman aged 70, Tambwe 1995.<sup>27</sup>

Of those that survived flight and life on the road some reached camps in western Rwanda, eastern Congo, Tanzania and Burundi, whilst others found themselves in areas controlled by the RPF.

‘When we were running away we went to Gisara and Kabarondo. When the RPF won we were taken to camps in Rwamagana. There we were helped as much as they could help us: food, shelter, clothes and so on.’  
B., Twa woman aged 48, Rutonde 1995.<sup>28</sup>

‘Before the war we survived by selling pots, but then we fled and stopped. Then we heard that we could go back to our homes. Unfortunately when we reached home we found that everything had been destroyed. Until now we are not well. Our children died at Kibehe [IDP camp]. Indeed a lot of people perished there. This place is all in ruins and I cannot estimate how many died here. There were too many.’  
M.B. Twa woman aged 55, Kanzenze 1995.<sup>29</sup>

The UNPO mission visited some refugee camps outside Rwanda in late 1994. They found that Twa in the refugee camps experienced particular difficulty in obtaining basic necessities such as food, plastic sheeting, clothing, cooking utensils and medical care. Twa rarely got jobs with the international NGOs supporting the camps. The daily

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<sup>26</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:63-4.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:67.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:67.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

administration of the camps was controlled by the former Hutu administrators who continued to abuse and discriminate against Twa. Twa explained to UNPO that they could not protest against this treatment since they were so few and the Hutu threatened them with violence (1995:26-30). This situation is typical of Twa refugees. Twa returnees from Uganda described similar discrimination against them during their stay in camps there (ibid:12).

## Coming Home

Like most Rwandans, most Twa had spent some period of the war in flight. Coming home marked the beginning of a new set of problems.

‘I am a very miserable person. I am a widow without children. I would like your help very much. We decided to escape when we first heard the loud noises of guns. Ruhengeri was the place we ran to. All the people I went with survived.

‘The problems started when we came back from exile. Many of our people were thrown into prison by others saying they were Interahamwe. We would like them back because the Twa people are very few, and therefore we need them. Our pottery does not earn us enough money to survive. So we do not eat well.

‘A long time ago our grandfathers used to hunt, and brought us back some meat. The Twa were even getting help from the kings, like Rudahigwa. But this has changed now. All of these changes made our living conditions very poor. I, for instance, do not have a house, neither do I have a good meal.

‘Maybe this is happening to us because we are Twa.’  
M.B., Twa woman aged 60, Tambwe 1995.<sup>30</sup>

People tended to flee with only the bare essentials for life on the road. Returning destitute to their communes they often found their houses destroyed and farms ransacked. The abject poverty of most Twa households meant that they had no other financial reserves such as property holdings they could sell upon return. Additionally the death, imprisonment and disappearance of so many men caused support networks to break down.

‘I had a small house that was destroyed during the war. In order to have somewhere to sleep I have tried to put together some corrugated iron sheets. When we came back all our belongings had been stolen. We did not even have anything to sleep in. All my brothers have been killed and my husband has been thrown into prison in Kigali.

‘I would like to have a house and a blanket. My two children who were at primary school have now stopped. We would like them to go back to school. Most of my

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<sup>30</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:69.

family died during the war. We have many problems. Yet we have our land, but we don't use it because we can't afford to buy the seeds. The money we get when we sell our pottery is barely enough to buy us food.'

U.R., Twa woman aged 29, Shyrongi 1995.<sup>31</sup>

The contradictory nature of many Twa's relations with the victorious RPF came out in many testimonies.

'I was married to a man and we had four children. Now only three are left. When the war started we fled to Gitarama. My husband died soon after. We fled in April and came back in July last year. The RPF helped us a lot, but anyone who went to Nyamata did not come back.

'Back in our village we found that our farm had been looted, our maize was gone and the rest had been burnt. The RPF gave us some seeds - peas, maize and beans - to grow again. No help with clothing though.

'My family has been wiped out except for myself and two younger brothers. An elder brother disappeared. They tortured me asking the whereabouts of a man who had lived with us.'

U.A. Twa woman aged 32, Kanzenze 1995.<sup>32</sup>

On the one hand many Twa owe their lives to the RPF who saved them from the Hutu extremists, many were given help and support in RPF- run displaced persons' camps, and once returned home RPF seed donations allowed many to begin planting again. But many Twa also recounted how their adult male relatives were stereotypically accused of participation in the massacres, often by people who hardly knew them, and executed or imprisoned by RPF soldiers applying arbitrary military justice.

'My husband N. is now in prison for no reason. They said that all those living in this place helped in with the massacres.'

M.B. Twa woman aged 23, Shyrongi 1995.<sup>33</sup>

## **Home to Prison**

Without doubt some Twa participated in the activities of the fanatical extremists. But the vast majority did not. Despite many Twa having resisted the force-to-kill policy, when they returned home many men were falsely branded as Interahamwe simply because some Twa from their area had participated in some way. Discrimination of the type experienced by the Twa depends on derogatory stereotypes and unjustified generalisations. Thus many Twa became double victims; first of the fanatical extremists, then of RPF elements attempting to administer justice.

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<sup>31</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:70.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:71.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:72.

‘Many Twa in Kabarondo have been killed. Even those who are still alive, we don’t know how they survived. Many of them were killed when they were trying to escape [Interahamwe]. Now this place is for people from other places. There were two Twa who survived but now they are in Kibungo prison. They are innocent but have been accused of eating the cows of Tutsi who had been killed. Our new neighbours [returnees from Uganda] don’t even want to see us. They say we are Interahamwe. I mention this because I would like to ask the new Government to consider this major problem.’

M.J., Twa woman aged 26, Kabarondo 1995.<sup>34</sup>

Lewis and Knight (1995) report many claims by the Twa of innocent relatives being arrested. Some put this down to the fact that the arrests were made by soldiers or other strangers rather than by local village leaders who knew most individuals.

‘All these are innocent people: M., B. and Ny. These people were taken by soldiers not by our village leaders. Until now we have not heard any news of them... Our people were innocent except Bu. and Nt. who have admitted to what they have done.’

M.S., Twa woman aged 25, Shyrongi 1995.

‘We got married before the war. When we came back from the place we had escaped to, we went to Kigali, to Kacyiru. From there my husband was thrown into prison by people who did not even know him. When we fled, we went to Munganza. When all the Interahamwe had left, that’s when we decided to come back. My husband is in Kimihurura Prison.’

N.F., Twa woman aged 24, Musambira 1995.<sup>35</sup>

After the war many Twa found themselves in prisons around the country. Severe overcrowding meant that only those with high status or better resources were able to secure themselves some shade from the sun and somewhere to sit. Due to the meagre supply of food and other necessities most prisoners depended on relatives to bring them extra food and money. Many Twa women interviewed in 1995 said that due to their poverty they can rarely bring food to their imprisoned relatives. The UNPO mission visited Kigali Prison and spoke to Twa inmates who told them that they were often pushed aside when lining up for distributions and that they rarely received their due share (1995:24). The chances for Twa inmates to survive long-term incarceration are not high.

‘My husband has been imprisoned in Gitarama prison. He was victimised for nothing. Even the councillor knows it. We hear that they are even beaten. We did not run away. We stayed here until the returnees found us here. Then people came to rob us saying he was an accomplice. There was a white man [a UN Human Rights Observer] who came because of this problem of prisoners when we were still at Gitizi. He asked me why they took my husband away even though there was no

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<sup>34</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:73.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:74.

proof that he was Interahamwe. We wish to be able to visit our prisoners. About three people were sent to prison and one has died in prison.’

M. I., Twa woman aged 42, Tambwe 1995.<sup>36</sup>

In some cases those arrested have simply disappeared.

‘When we came back from exile people started to look for us. After three months my son was taken from us by force. It was around one a.m. Until now no one knows where he is and that is my worry.’

M. J., Twa woman aged 42, Tambwe 1995.<sup>37</sup>

Those Twa who disappeared after their arrest are likely to have been executed. Lewis and Knight were told of several cases in which Twa had seen their relatives executed by RPF soldiers. Those who spoke were reluctant to raise these cases with the authorities for fear of causing themselves more trouble.

UNPO reports a number of massacres of Twa by RPF soldiers in the early days of the RPF take-over in June and July 1994. A Twa widow witnessed the arrest and execution of a group of displaced Twa returning home to Gitarama. Another man related that 70 inhabitants of his village, including 17 Twa, were forced by RPF to attend a meeting at the village market place on June 6<sup>th</sup> 1994. All those present, including his wife and four children were killed. Other reports include the killing of a group of displaced Twa searching for food in their old houses. On July 18<sup>th</sup> 1994 the RPF summoned a meeting in a village in Gitarama. There were several Twa among the more than 500 people who attended. All were killed.<sup>38</sup>

The worry and uncertainty caused by so many people having disappeared during and after the war continues to be a major source of anguish to those who are left. Many have resigned themselves to the facts but are unable to comprehend why, like the woman from Tambwe quoted above: ‘Maybe this is happening to us because we are Twa.’ Despite all they suffered during the war and the loss of so many men afterwards, many Twa left in the countryside continued to be victimised by those around them. In one place visited in 1995 we saw children throwing stones at a group of Twa women with their infants. We asked why this was happening.

‘Those throwing stones at us are mostly boys who are saying that our husbands are Interahamwe. Yet all the new commune officials know that we are innocent. The Interahamwe are presently in Tanzania and Zaire and not leaving there. It is other people coming from other places that say we are Interahamwe. But how can they know?’

K. B., Twa woman aged 38, Kanzenze 1995.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:75.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> UNPO 1995:20-21).

<sup>39</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:77.

Many Twa are simply at a loss to understand why so many horrors have been imposed upon them.

‘When the war started we saw people running, so we fled as well to Gitarama. Then we were told by the RPF to return to our homes. We still live in our homes but they took our people who were innocent. I have lost three people since the war. We are very needy for food and clothing. There were atrocities done, anybody could be killed, Tutsi and even Hutu. But I wonder why we, the Twa, had to be maltreated?’  
M. J. Twa woman aged 30, Kanzenze 1995.<sup>40</sup>

‘None of the Twa wanted power or played with the politics of killing. Each Twa finds himself or herself without relatives and we have no idea why we had to suffer.’  
P. J-B., Twa man aged 35, Kigoma 1995.<sup>41</sup>

Mostly without allegiance to any side the Twa found themselves caught in the middle of a terrifying war in which they became victims irrespective of what they did or did not do. After miraculously surviving the mass killings and horrendous threats of Interahamwe without participating, many Twa then found themselves subjected to more persecution as they helplessly witnessed innocent relatives being thrown into prison, executed, disappeared or tortured, even sometimes having their land grabbed by strangers. To most the injustice is incomprehensible.

‘What I do not understand is why every man who goes out does not come back. They [the new local authorities] say he should die. When we fled to a place called Munatobwe the people who were with us were killed by Interahamwe at the road blocks. When my husband returned from exile and we reached the commune of Musambira they accused him of being an accomplice to murder. He was victimised for nothing. How could they do it?’

We the Twa have always been ignored, yet they call us Interahamwe and I am afraid they will kill me. Why are they making up all these lies against us? They say if my husband turns up they will kill him, and so he will stay in exile. They say we should go home to get photographs for identity cards. Yet if we go they will kill us. Moreover there is nothing to go back for.’  
M.S. Twa woman aged 30, Musambira 1995.<sup>42</sup>

For many Twa this situation could not be rationally explained, but was understood within the familiar idiom of discrimination: because they are Twa, people despise and hate them.

‘When the war began we heard about it from Ruhango. My husband and I, with some other people, tried to escape. Everyone was fleeing in different directions. We were placed in refugee camps after two weeks. When the war ended we were told to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:78

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

go back to our homes and we went. Since we arrived soldiers started looking for my husband saying that he had taken part in massacres, which was not true. People from this area were killed by those who came from Kibungo.

‘This is happening because we are not liked, which is why they decided to say the Twa were involved. For we Twa don’t belong to any political party.

‘But in the end my husband was thrown into prison in Gitarama. They were also saying that their wives were Interahamwe. Therefore we were supposed to be taken as well. Even though they [the husbands of Twa women] are innocent we get called Interahamwe which is very bad stigma. We were also charged thirty thousand francs (US\$125) saying that we had eaten Tutsi cows. We do not even have land to farm. The money we get from our pottery is being given to the leader of this village until we have paid up the thirty thousand - while feeding three children at the same time.

‘All of these things were done because they don’t like the Twa. These people do not even care about the children.’

N.F. Twa woman aged 31, 1995.<sup>43</sup>

## **The loss of children and men**

During research in 1995 it became apparent that many of the men who escaped death during the war were put into prisons around the country. Most Twa villages were populated predominantly by elderly women and orphans.

‘During this war Twa men are the ones who have been most affected. The majority of them have died and others have been thrown into prison. On the one hand we don’t know why all these terrible things are happening to Twa people as we don’t support anyone. This is very stressful because many innocent people have suffered for no reason.

‘In this area of Kabarondo I am the only man still with my children. In Ruramira there are only old women: even their children [now adults] who managed to survive were put into prison. In other words, the place is destroyed.’

S.S. Twa man aged 37, Kabarondo 1995.<sup>44</sup>

When visiting Twa villages in 1995 we did a census of those who remained. We compared these figures, where possible, with the census we had conducted in the same village in 1993, seven months before the beginning of the genocide. The comparison allowed us to estimate the extent of the Twa’s losses. The table illustrates this:

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<sup>43</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:78-9.

<sup>44</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:79-80.

Location		1993			1995			Adults left in 1995	
Province	Commune	Child	Adult	Total	Child	Adult	Total	Women	Men
Kigali Rurale	Shyongi	168	90	258	34	26	60	15	11
Kigali Rurale	Kanzenze	131	103	234	63	48	111	28	20
Kibungo	Kabarondo	20	22	42	7	5	12	4	1
Kibungo	Rotunde	61	63	124	21	31	52	23	8
Gitarama	Kigoma	26	27	53	16	15	31	9	6
Gitarama	Tambwe	25	32	57	31	20	51	15	4
Kibuye	Bwakira	21	16	37	3	1	4	1	0
<b>Totals</b>		<b>452</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>805</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>321</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>50</b>

Table 1: Twa communities' censuses from 1993 and 1995.<sup>45</sup>

'We the Twa do not understand why we are being victimised. Moreover I find that nobody cares. We are only women here, our men have all perished. So we women now have no say whatsoever about our lives and we would like to know why we are being maltreated.'

M.O. Twa woman aged 18, Tambwe 1995.<sup>46</sup>

The results suggest that approximately 40 per cent (about 11,000 people) of the 1993 Twa population were still living in Rwanda in 1995.<sup>47</sup> The UNPO mission found that approximately 30 per cent of the pre-war Twa population (8-10,000 people) were in refugee camps outside Rwanda (1995:28). The appalling conclusion is that up to 30 per cent of the Rwandan Twa died or were killed between October 1993 and June 1995. The majority of those left in Rwanda in 1995 were poverty stricken women and children with few sources of income and inadequate land.

Of the 30 per cent of the Rwandan Twa who died or were killed during the mass killings and ensuing war the majority of victims were Twa children and men. Some of the problems facing men have been described. Children were especially vulnerable to the perils of war and life as refugees. Twa children have suffered excessively.

## Rebuilding

The burden of rebuilding a home, feeding and caring for the remaining children is now mostly the responsibility of women alone. Without men to help them life has become desperately difficult. Poverty-stricken women and children today dominate most Twa communities in Rwanda. They are mostly illiterate, have few sources of income, inadequate land, and their poverty is compounded by the discrimination they continue to suffer from non-Twa.

<sup>45</sup> Based on Lewis and Knight 1995:81.

<sup>46</sup> Lewis and Knight 1995:81.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

The plight of the Twa of Rotunde is illustrative of the entrenched problems facing Twa communities attempting to rebuild their lives. Before the genocide Rotunde boasted a large and renowned community of Twa. In 1993 there were 124 people in 32 households. In 1999 only around 60 people remained, living in 27 households. Only one consisted of an adult woman and man. Widows or single mothers managed all the other households. Many of the household heads are elderly women caring for the orphans of their siblings and children. Despite support from a sympathetic mayor the situation of these households is dire.

They are in a poverty trap. The Rotunde widows explained that their entire working day is occupied just obtaining some food for the children they care for. The pressures of finding food to feed these children were immense, and many of the elder women complained that their bodies were tired from the daily agricultural labouring they had to do for other people in order to earn a day's meal. Even when these families received some aid in the form of agricultural tools, household implements and seeds, the marginality of their subsistence strategies and consequent frequent food shortages, resulted in many of the women selling or consuming these items to get food.

In order to get help from NGOs these women had to form an association registered by the commune. When these women did manage to form an association many members failed to attend meetings and other association activities. Finding extra time to work for the association proved impossible for most of them. Their difficulties in achieving community cooperation are aggravated by the individualism that destitution encourages.

The greatest worry facing this community at the time of my last visit in 1999 was the extensive building of an '*imidugudu*' village for 'war survivors' being undertaken by the Ministry for Public Works (Minitrap). At the time of visiting many of the Twa faced obligatory resettlement as new houses were going to be built on their land. The Twa explained that because their huts were not made from durable materials like brick and iron sheeting, their land was being compulsorily bought by Minitrap for redevelopment. Although they acknowledged that they would receive compensation, previous experience made them fear that they would be cheated out of the money quickly because of their innumeracy. They worried that they would end up with no money and no land.

The Twa widows complained that only Tutsi widows are given support, the Twa and Hutu widows were not considered for rehousing. A complaint echoed in other parts of Rwanda.

'We Twa war widows live in great poverty and we have no houses. We have nowhere to live. Our homes were demolished. We can't repair them because we are only women here. The government only builds houses for certain people, but not for us. We are not included. ... Only the Tutsi get help in our region.'

Twa woman aged 35, Rwanda. July 1999.

In the rare cases where Twa have succeeded in getting houses in mixed *imidugudu* settlements Jackson (2003:17) reports that there are many disputes with neighbours, who

accuse them of trespassing on fields and causing a nuisance with the smoke from pot-firing. In one settlement on the outskirts of Kigali the Twa are so fed up with the constant tensions that they are considering abandoning their hard won houses to go elsewhere. Twa organisations play an important role in supporting Twa in such situations by seeking solutions acceptable to the parties involved.

The post-war Rwandan government's de-emphasis on ethnic identity has had some positive effects. Public discrimination against Twa is less pronounced. Other people are now more likely to sit with Twa and some even share food and drink. However private and less open forms of discrimination still widely occur. Despite the policy against identifying people ethnically, Rwandan Twa still feel discriminated against on the basis of being Twa. As this chapter documents, this has been particularly evident in unjustified accusations against Twa over their war-time activities. In addition discrimination continues to occur in access to jobs, education, land, natural resources, justice and to the benefits of development projects. Although there has been some improvement since 1993 deeply held prejudice does not disappear by government decree.

The specific problems facing those Twa left in Rwanda are not adequately addressed by current government development strategies. Additionally, those who try to address Twa issues are often accused of favouritism and even prevented from doing so. If the Twa are to take their places as full citizens of Rwanda they need an approach that takes account of the unique problem facing them: that of their extreme discrimination and marginalization by non-Twa. Their small numbers, lack of education and organizational skills, and the effects of generations of discrimination, exploitation and poverty, now dramatically worsened by the absence of so many men, compound this problem.

## **The emergence of representation**

Despite their extensive marginalization, in 1991 some Twa succeeded in setting up the first representative organizations of Twa people. The Association Pour la Promotion des Batwa was founded in Rwanda to promote Twa human rights, and to assist Twa to improve their standard of living.<sup>48</sup>

The courage and persistence of these associations have inspired the formation of other Twa groups, most recently in Burundi and Uganda. The Twa are now embarked on a process which will hopefully enable them to represent themselves effectively at local, national and international levels. They are now aware of, and participating in, the international movement supporting minority and indigenous rights. Indeed their example has helped stimulate the emergence of a regional network of forest hunter-gatherer organizations across Central Africa.

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<sup>48</sup> Jackson (1999) outlines the history of these associations, including the Congolese Twa's association PIDP-Kivu, also founded in 1991.

The majority of Rwandan Twa are unable to enjoy most aspects of modern society: equal access to state support, to the right to self-determination, to education, justice, health care, and property holding. The problems are aggravated by official objections to singling out the Twa for special provision. The severe discrimination and poverty they daily experience has alienated many from their traditional culture and values. Most Twa find themselves with neither a viable traditional life nor with access to the benefits of modern society.

The Twa are probably the most vulnerable group in Rwanda and the Great Lakes Region more generally. Although there are other vulnerable groups in the region, the Twa case is singular because of the generations of extreme discrimination other people have practised against them. Their case is special and requires special and distinctive action to resolve it.

The discrimination from which they suffer is based on ethnic identity and imposed on the Twa by non-Twa people. Ethnic discrimination is clearly a very serious problem in the region. The attention has been on Hutu and Tutsi relations. However, improvement of conditions for the Twa is likely to be an important indicator of genuine improvement regarding ethnic, social, economic and political conditions in Rwanda. It is now time to address the prejudice expressed by other groups towards the Twa. To achieve this the Twa will require committed government, international and popular support.

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